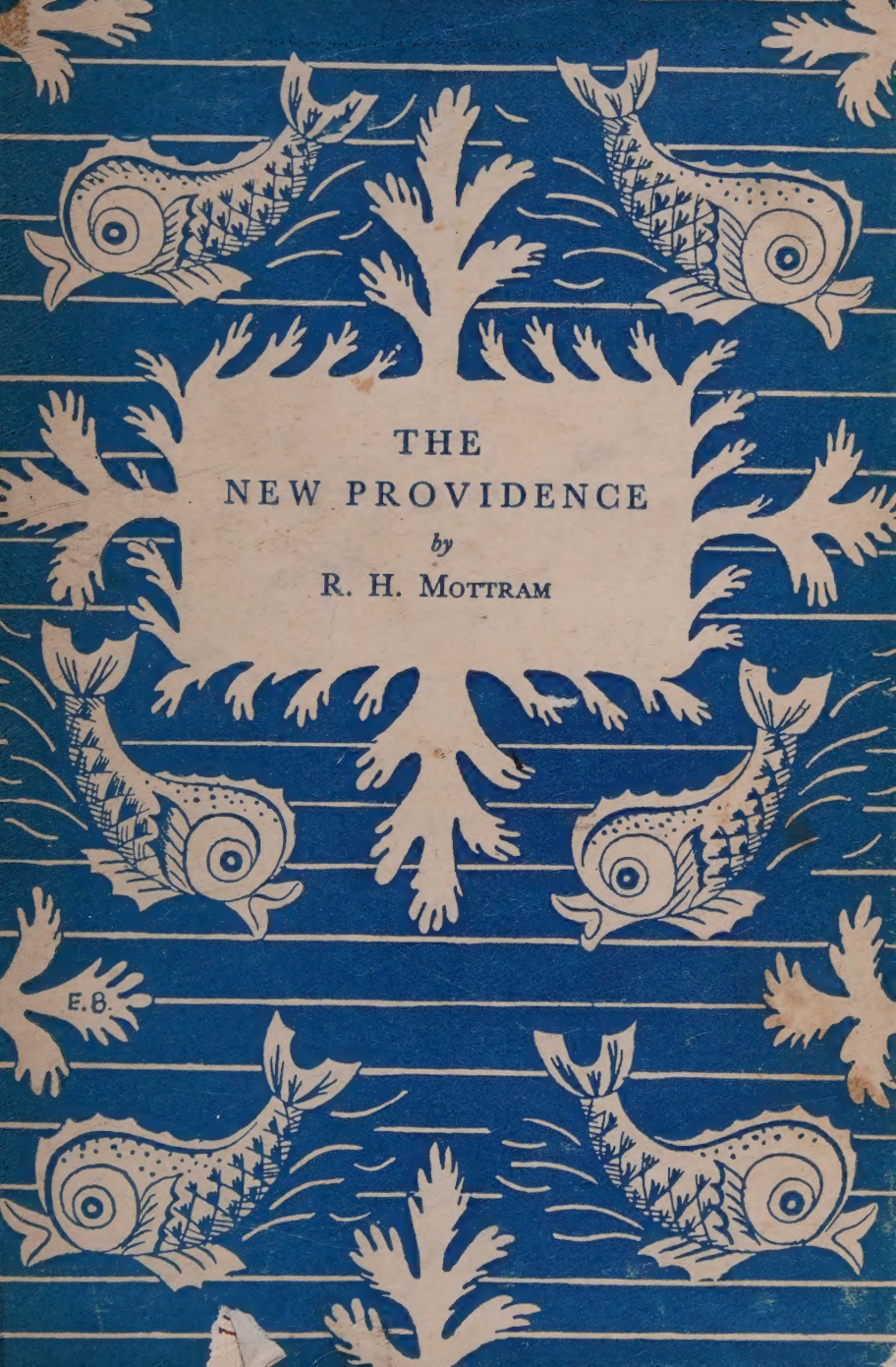
THE NEW PROVIDENCE

by

R. H. MOTTRAM



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THE NEW PROVIDENCE

BY R. H. MOTTRAM

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THE NEW PROVIDENCE

I

'HERE she comes!'

The rumour passed swiftly from mouth to mouth, causing, in the crowd that stood, sat, lay, disposed itself how and where it could, all about the trampled grass beyond the railings, a movement that was like that of a tousled hayfield when the wind passes over it. Those who were on the ground struggled to get up, the sitting stood, those standing tried to push and elbow forward. Leah outdid most of them, for she had been sitting on the grass, munching the still warm mutton-pie that was her dinner that day, with her other hand maintaining in an upright position the bottle of stout which, uncorked and half empty, was being kept cool inside the straw basket; and even so she found time to turn her fresh-cheeked face from side to side, her full brown eyes roving about the great concourse of people, her lips pursed and compressed with munching her pie, not too busy to fling mildly humorous conjecture to her sister. Not that Leah

was a flirt, or consciously desired attention. There was nothing so calculated about anything she did. It was just that her full-blooded vitality couldn't bear to miss anything. 'Fancy that' and 'Lor'' began and ended all her comments on the crowd, the occasion, and her feeling. When the cry of: 'Here she comes!' reached her ears, she rose with one thrust of her strong legs and shoved forward. Her sister Rachel, rather smaller, paler, less vigorous, whose duller eyes fixed themselves on some invisible point in front of her as she bent her whole energy on consuming her dinner, used one hand to lever herself up, then sat down again suddenly, with an exclamation of annoyance, dropping her half-eaten pie, and putting one hand gingerly behind her, scowling darkly to left and right.

'Here she comes! Stir your stumps, Rachel!' came the high, laughing voice of Leah, who had progressed perhaps three feet and was almost touching the rails, over which was advanced her face, rendered handsome by the brightness excitement lent to eyes and cheeks. As her sister didn't instantly press beside her, she turned, hurriedly cramming the rest of her pie into her mouth, reached out her thus disengaged hand, clutched that of her sister, and dragged her forward beside her, giving the arm that came next her little convulsive squeezes against her abundant self. But Rachel's voice was full of apprehension:

'Some chap 's stood on my skirt. I reckon he 's tore it right out of the gathers!'

'Lor'!' There was concern in Leah's voice, but almost amusement too, and swift impulse to action:

'Tu'n round!' She forcibly twisted her sister round in spite of the pressure of the throng about them.

'No!' was her report, summary and decisive. And with rich consciousness of the forbidden beauties of which she and her sister were custodians, she added:

'No sights!' and glanced round triumphantly, as if to mitigate the disappointment any male heart might be suffering from. But every one was staring forward at the new cloud of dust that rose golden in the sunshine above the already serried ranks of uniformed infantry that had been standing there for more than an hour, while every ear was assailed by the deafening blare of 'Rule, Britannia,' that rendered conversation impossible. The moving pillar of dust could now be seen to arise from a newly oncoming battalion, that, headed by its perspiring labouring band, was wheeling directly towards the spot where the girls were wedged against the waist-high wooden barrier. In front came the tall, broad figure of the Drum Major, his superb carriage enhanced by the consciousness of responsibility and splendour as he twirled his gilded staff and led the band in a half circle, where they marked time as they wound up the concluding phrase of the march

with an ear-splitting roll of the drums. Next came the Colonel Commanding, high on his great brown charger, the sunshine winking on plume and sword, on points of accoutrements and harness, as he resolutely restrained the nervous animal, and made it, prancing and side-stepping, take post for the next manœuvre. Then, as the band ceased, and the brilliant scarlet column poured towards the rails, there was a subsidence and a murmur in the crowd. Leah's voice rose audible above it :

'Lor', it ain't the Queen—it 's more sojers—— Why, look, Rachel gal, it 's our chaps, it 's the Easthamptons ! Fancy ! '

'No, is it ? ' queried the less impulsive sister.

'Wh' yes ! That was Mister Watts, in front of the Musickers—him that keep the tap at the George. That 's Mister Bird, on the horse. Ain't it a beauty ? '

'Why, so 'tis,' Rachel admitted. 'Fancy them coming just here.'

''Spect they knew they 'd be reckernised ! ' put in the young man against whom Leah was pinned by the press and who seemed to regret the relaxation of the forward urge of the crowd that had brought him into so pleasant a contact.

'Go along, do ! ' she reproved him, with her lips only.

There was no reproof in her eyes. But Rachel justified herself :

'Well, I shouldn't have known 'em. Not in those hats!'

'Shakos!' put in the imperfectly reproved neighbour.

Rachel looked straight before her:

'Have it your own way!' she said tartly, so that a shade of melancholy spread over the hairy cheeks and lips that sucked the handle of the fashionable cane that the would-be acquaintance carried.

At some half-audible command, the First Volunteer Battalion the Easthamptonshire Regiment was halted and thrown into line. Officers doubled to their places, sergeants were busy adjusting the ranks to a more perfect symmetry. Then the order was given to stand at ease. The line became ragged and serried. Shakos were removed, foreheads mopped. Rifles leaned at all angles. Evidently the Queen was not even yet expected. The crowd composed itself to await her, once more resumed or regretted its interrupted luncheon. Rachel grieved for a remnant of pie wasted. Leah consoled her. There was still some stout left, some pieces of cold pudding. Leah licked her fingers with gusto, Rachel hers with care, both wiped them on their handkerchiefs, and, at Leah's suggestion, edged closer to the rails, to scan the stalwart Easthampton ranks to see if any one of their acquaintance might be therein.

Those ranks had become somewhat disordered. The volunteers were unused to the hardships of the true military life. They had learned to march, and shoot, and perform manual exercises, but they had never been trained in its endless delays and irritating meaningless discomforts. They lounged in all sorts of attitudes, unbuttoned and awry. The sergeant of the flank company, nearest the rails, had actually let his rifle rest against the barrier, and contrived to support himself against it without the appearance of actually sitting. The two girls found their survey impeded by a broad geranium back, while two massive like-coloured elbows, above one of which were the three inverted silver chevrons of his rank, were tucked behind him so as to take the weight of his body off his feet. It was Leah who peered round at the averted face, and immediately drew back and gave her sister a sharp nudge. Like all Leah's movements, it was a little more than Rachel was equal to. She found herself thrown, however lightly, against the volunteer's tight well-filled tunic, and recoiled with an exclamation. A well-coloured, well-fed pleasant face pivoted round. The sweeping brown moustache that overlaid the chin-strap brushed her cheek, and as she moved hastily towards her sister, pivoted in the reverse direction, with a boy's readiness for distraction.

'Ho, ho!' came a deep bass chuckle; the man

swung his whole body round, and a pair of laughing blue-grey eyes stared straight into those of first one girl, then the other. Leah stared back with good-humoured confidence. Rachel averted her eyes to her sister's face. She could not have said why. Perhaps it was to check Leah's startling exuberance, perhaps, more obscurely, a feeling that she stood no chance of any attention so long as she competed with her sister. This mild rivalry had happened before, once or twice, and Rachel had found that her only hope was to be less, not more, on-coming than Leah. It made boys notice, as her less obvious charms never did, dimmed by Leah's bright accessibility. It acted.

'Here 's a stroke of luck!' came the bass chuckle.

'How d'you know?' Leah was equal to him.

'I know a pretty gal when I see one!'

'You are clever!'

'Of course I am, or I shouldn't be here!' He still turned his glance with perfect regularity from one to the other. Leah still confronted him, Rachel looked sedulously at Leah.

'If you ask me, it 's high time you got on with your review. We 've been waiting these two hours!'

'That 's what I always tell the Queen. She is so dilatory!' And they all laughed. Even Rachel couldn't withstand the openness of his impudence. Both girls agreed that the troops were a lovely sight,

that the band was magnificent. He obligingly pointed out the Colonel, the Colonel's horse being led up and down, and with a sharp nudge Leah enjoined on her sister to pretend they were both wonderstruck, when all the time the person in question was well known to them by sight. In order to impart this information, he turned towards the field and threw his arms behind him over the rail. A faint pressure informed Rachel that one of them had found its way round her waist under her mantle. She tried to disengage herself, but the arm held firm, and the growing impatience of the crowd had fixed the girls firmly in their places. A glance towards Leah revealed that his other arm was round her waist, and caused Rachel to resist no longer. Leah didn't seem to mind this familiarity, but to be enjoying it rather.

'You 've got some sauce!' was her only comment, in the least forbidding tone ever used by offended modesty.

'Well, y'see,' he explained, 'I 'm a stranger here. I can do as I like. No one knows me!'

'Oh, don't we, Mr. Parsley? *We* know you quite well!' Whatever was Leah thinking of? She was laughing fit to kill herself. Rachel had to smile. The astonished bewilderment on his face was so comic.

'Well, I 'm blowed!' he remarked, as soon as he could get his breath, withdrawing his arms and turning

round again to survey them. 'I might ha' known you came from Easthampton by your talk. I thought you weren't Londoners!'

'Don't be too sharp. Might cut yourself!' Leah bubbled.

'N' yet, I 've never seen you. Where do you live?'

'Ah, wouldn't you like to know?'

'Oh, well, that 's all right, if you don't want to say. You 're in service, I suppose?' he added, scanning their formal black clothes.

'I never said so.'

'I don't think none the less of you,' he returned, and seemed to mean it. He couldn't take his eyes off Leah now. 'When 's your night out?'

'Ah!' How tantalising Leah looked, Rachel, now completely a third party, grudgingly admitted.

'You needn't fear, I 'm not coming hanging round the back door getting you into trouble with Missus!'

'I 'll see you don't!'

'Tell y' what. I 'll put a line in the Personal column in the *Courier*. Meet you in Chantry Fields.'

'You 'll never!' Leah flashed a defiance that was even more an invitation.

'Won't I? . . . Hullo, what 's that?'

It was a bugle call, that caused a good deal of shouting, a sudden stir and straightening in the ranks of lounging troops, a rapid closing in of the crowd.

Sergeant Parsley seized his rifle, found his place in a few strides, became a different being from the jocular boy who had dallied with the girls a moment earlier. They had hardly time to admire him. This time it was no false alarm. From across the Park clouds of dust did not conceal the brilliance of the cavalcade nor an ever-approaching roll of cheers drown the sharp trot of the horses of the escort as the Royal Procession debouched upon the field. That was why Rachel had no opportunity of questioning Leah as to her knowledge of Mr. Parsley in his capacity as a sergeant, or any other, nor a chance of remonstrating with her for being 'forward.' Not that it would have been any good. It was increasingly difficult to curb Leah within the bounds of what Rachel thought proper. At the moment it didn't matter. Leah cheered with the loudest, waved with the most frantic, Rachel admiringly imitating her. The spectacle that unrolled its splendour before them was worth it. There, among a group of magnificent helmeted, gauntleted, booted and cuirassed soldiers on horseback, directly attended by Princes and Dukes of her own and other Royal lineage, by superb Generals and astonishing foreigners, sat a little old lady in an open carriage. The fact that she was aged and worn and dressed in black made all the more striking how much a Queen and Empress she was; not that she was more beautiful than other

women, but that she was in a class apart. Around her the bands clashed and brayed, the lovely horses (Leah and Rachel were country girls and admired those as well) gleamed and swung their heads, and thousands of incomparable young men, even some mighty proud-looking old ones among the officers, rode or marched, with such expanded chests, such steadfast eyes, arms and legs moving as one, such sweeping moustaches and curling whiskers, that the whole park was a dazzling mirage of scarlet and gold, pipe-clay and metal. Breathless with excitement and cheering, the girls soon used up their meagre store of expressions, 'Lor'' and 'My,' 'Fancy' and 'Did you ever!' It was a positive relief to them when the last straight-backed company had marched from the field, and, fanning and mopping themselves, they could slowly find their way out amid that enormous happy throng.

But what were they to do now? There was no hope of getting into one of the 'buses that plied from the busy streets around the Park in the direction in which they wanted to go. Rachel's heart sank. They would be late, miss their train! The enormity of it! They had had a day's holiday given them as a special treat,—but to take two days! What a blessing it was that she had Leah to look after her. Leah had no intention of missing the train or anything else. After one or two abortive attempts to shove their way to a

'bus, she cast about her, turning away, smiling but firm, from one or two offers of a lift, and other attempts of the male sex to get on better terms with so good-looking, fresh-cheeked a pair of girls, and spied one of the railway wagons, stationary in an apparently impassable congestion of the traffic.

'Here, young man,' rang Leah's persuasive voice, 'give us a lift on your cart!' and with a heave and a hoist, and help from one of those sharp cheeky London boys who hung on by a rope at the back of the grimy, black-tarpaulin-tilted conveyance, they found themselves sitting on and among all sorts of queer boxes and packages; the entire street gave a sort of surge forward, and they were being joggled and bumped along at a very fair pace. Rachel had bruised her shin, Leah had a button gone.

'But that don't matters,' she gasped. 'Whoa-pse,' a lurch of the vehicle made her gasp. Then: 'What have you got t'laugh at, young pie-face?'

This was the boy, who, miraculously suspended by his rope's end on the tail-board, was apparently finding them entertaining.

'Come up from the country, don't yer?' he queried.

'Just mind y'business, or I'll take a walk round your best affections!' Leah cheerfully responded, in no doubt as to the fact that the carter, not the boy, was obliging them. And to Rachel:

' Gal, put y'hat straight, do, it 's all a-one-side ! '

But it didn't prevent them from getting to Wormwood Street in good time, where Leah tapped the carter on the back, and ignoring the boy's impudent : ' 'Ere, wot 's this little treat worf ? ' leapt down, helped Rachel and gave her smiling thanks where she deemed them due. They were able to return the empty stout bottle to Aunt Pleasants, gulp a cup of tea, interspersed with a hurried account of the glories of the Review, and to run across with two slabs of cake in a piece of paper, to find their places on the wooden seats of a roofed but undivided third-class carriage of their train.

The carriage was packed, largely with people who had come up for the same purpose as themselves, and also engaged in eating anything they had with them, to fortify themselves for the four hours' journey necessary to accomplish the hundred miles to Easthampton. This wiled away some rattling, jolting minutes, and after it Leah sat, silent for a wonder, her lips set in a smile, her eyes half closed upon some far-away vision. Rachel, longing to nurse her battered shin, viewed their immediate neighbours with disfavour. She was clammy where she had been hot, exhausted and in some little pain. About her, men who had brought bottles or flasks with them were casting glances that she considered ' forward ' at her, and especially at her

sister. When a malty, spirituous flavour began to enliven the conversation one humorist was emboldened to call attention to ' these nice young ladies, what 'd be grateful to any one as offered 'em something to take ' (East Anglian for a drink). Rachel looked steadily away, but another took up the jest : ' One of 'em seem to me to get on well with the sojers. Pipe-clay ! Well, I never ! '

Rachel turned expectant towards Leah, hoping to hear a suitable rebuff administered. Leah was asleep. And, sure enough, just under her right breast, the black bodice, visible now that she had removed her mantle, displayed a patch of white clayish powder. That sergeant ! Rachel was no match for this. She hastily closed her own eyes. And the increasingly bibulous preoccupations of their fellow-travellers were deflected, then became disconnected, finally incoherent and somnolent. Rachel herself dozed, in spite of the discomforts of the journey, the awful length of it, the frequent stopping at wayside stations, that jerked her half off the seat, half awake. If not so strong as Leah, Rachel was a hard country girl and used to putting up with a good deal. Finally a prolonged stop and a good deal of shouting meant Easthampton. She woke Leah, who was sleeping like a child. They emerged from the murk of the station into dimly gas-lighted streets. It was past ten o'clock

and no place to loiter in. Rachel's leg hurt her, Leah was hardly awake, tripped at the kerb of the footpath, laughed, and leaned on Rachel, who leaned against her. Thus, arm in arm, they arrived at the side door of the Bank House without serious molestation. Mrs. Wellowes, the housekeeper, was waiting up and hoped they had had a nice day. She had cleared away and washed up after Master's supper, so there was nothing for them to do but go to bed. They thanked her warmly for her kindness and made their way quietly upstairs. Once in the garret which they shared even to its candle, Rachel would have been too sleepy to call up questions of conduct had not Leah herself noticed the pipe-clay on her dress. She laughed. Rachel, caressing a purple shin from which she had drawn the stocking, was shocked :

' Leah, you didn't oughter go on so with that chap ! '

' Well, I couldn't help his standing there, just where we was, could I ? '

' But you didn't want t'take up with a feller you 'd never seen before.'

' How d'you know I 'd never seen 'im before ? '

' Well, you hadn't ! '

For answer, Leah, emerging from the neck of her nightgown that she never buttoned, flopped down beside the bed, hastily muttered her prayers behind interlaced fingers, blew out the candle, flung herself on

the bed, grabbed more than half the clothes with her left arm, turned her sister bodily over crying : ' Where are your eyes, gal ! ' and with her right hand administered three hearty slaps on a portion of Rachel's bare anatomy in which her eyes certainly weren't.

' Don't be so stingy ! ' was the remonstrance. Leah stifled it with a breath-expelling hug and three kisses as resounding as the slaps. Into Rachel's neck she muttered : ' *Tell you to-morrow.* Lor', go t'sleep, do, I 'm that sleepy, I 'll never wake at six, you 'll have t'bawl at me ! ' relaxed, and snored.

But she was as good as her word. The domestic routine of the Bank House, if not designed, had at least been modified in view of the dual use of the building. For, except the kitchen and its adjuncts, all the great old rooms of the ground floor were incorporated in the offices of the Bank, even the first floor front rooms had been converted by removing their floors. When the main doors were closed for business the clerks had to come in and go out by the house door, in Middens Alley, traversing the hall of the house itself, by the foot of the stairs. It had been so arranged that this took place between nine and half-past in the morning, when Leah and Rachel were two storeys up, making beds, emptying slops, sweeping and dusting. When the clerks left in the afternoon the two girls were equally engaged in preparing high tea for Master, Missis, and

as many children as might be available. During this duty on the day after the Review, Leah, with a glance to see that cook was busy and the housekeeper away, dragged Rachel by the arm along the dark passage to the back of the green baize-covered door that gave upon the hall. In this was a small glass panel that allowed any one within to see what passed in the well-lighted hall, while giving no indication of those who might be spying from the obscure passage. Here Leah squeezed her sister's face against her own with a totally unnecessary 'sh-sh-sh,' and they waited. Old Mr. Swan emerged from the door that gave upon the back of the office, and with sour face and carefully adjusted hat, drew on his gloves and let himself out into Middens Alley to go home. Then two or three other clerks, old or young. Then young Mr. Prosser, in perfect black as befitted his deeply religious nature, going with energetic strides and head bowed in humility and hurry to get on to some good work or other. The girls pressed close together. Every Sunday they went to the 'Meeting' at which Mr. Prosser spoke. The door banged behind him, decisively. Then two or three more, old or young, but quite uninteresting, by nature or the fact of being married. Finally, in the midst of a group, unmistakable with his martial bearing, his light blue eye, fine stature and carriage, and his lovely moustache, strode their acquaintance of the day

before. Rachel shrank back, but Leah held her firm with a surreptitious titter. Allowing the house door to close upon the laughter that greeted some anecdote he was recounting, Rachel whispered :

'Well, I never ! You never *tole* me ! '

'I never took much notice until yesterday. Then his saying we didn't know him made me come out with it ! '

'Well, I didn't know,' Rachel expostulated.

'Find'ums, keep'ums ! ' laughed Leah. And then : 'Lor', there go the Master. Hurry, gal ! ' and they fled as the figure of Mr. Dormer, the manager, passed weightily out from the office. He delayed a moment to glance at the clock, tap the barometer, then proceeded upstairs with the deliberate importance of one of the phenomena of nature. A moment later the dining-room bell clashed with a vigour that kept it wagging on its iron spring for a period sufficient to allow the girls to get along the passage and half-way up the first flight with their loaded trays.

[II]

As a matter of fact, Frank Parsley thought there was nothing else for it, he 'd have to put a line in the paper as he had said. He was unused to being treated by girls as those two girls at the Review had treated him. The fact that he had had no opportunity to pick them up afterwards, and had failed to elicit where they lived, piqued his vanity. It had been further piqued by the rather flattering inquiries of the other clerks who worked in the room of which he was, if not titular head, at least the brightest ornament. Frank Parsley's vanity had an innocent quality that rendered it totally inoffensive, almost endearing, to his fellows, while slightly annoying to his seniors and intimidating to his juniors. Among those of his own age and status, that is between twenty-five and thirty, and something better than a mere ledger-keeper, but not quite so responsible as a cashier, he had during his ten years' service become a legend. His conquests among the fair sex and sporting triumphs, the amount of beer he could drink, and the sums he paid for Essence of Barbary to anoint his moustache and whiskers, were topics that passed from lip to lip, from the bar at the George as high as the Bank parlour. He wrote a good hand,

was quick at figures, but despised his job, except that its regular salary was a guarantee of the continuance of his simple pleasures, and he was hardly conscious that his reputation demanded an upkeep that was becoming a drain upon his resources both of pocket and of wit. All the afternoon he had been saying : ' Ah ! wouldn't you like to know ! ' and : ' Don't ask questions and you won't hear no lies ! ' There had arisen to the surface of his not very subtle mind, from which the two girls might otherwise have passed with a shrug, a conviction that he must do something about them. When he passed across the hall of the Bank House, within a few yards of the very girls who had taken, he felt, such an unheard of advantage of him, his mind was made up. Outside the house door he stopped on the super-whitened steps, and lit his pipe with a flourish.

' Well, good evening, gentlemen. I may see some of you later. Just now, you 'll excuse me ! '

This was greeted by derisive chorus : ' You dog ! ' ' Going mashing ? ' ' What 's the fancy, Frank ? ' ' Plain or ringlets ? ' which he dismissed with a wave of his cane, and made his way down the alley to the George tap. As he thought, Chesman, the reporter of the *Courier*, was there, and having passed the habitual ' Hallo, Chessy, what 's yours ? The usual ? ' he was soon able to inquire :

'How do people put adverts in your paper?'

Chesman told him to ask at the office counter, where they would inform him as to spaces and prices. Frank nodded uneasily. The idea, which he had borrowed from some joke he had heard about matrimonial agents, presented more difficulties in execution than he had thought. He bound Chesman to secrecy and continued:

'How d'you advertise for a person?'

'Hullo, some one been forging?' Chesman obviously regretted his promise, and seemed to scent news as a dog scents game.

'Nothin' of the sort,' Frank assured him somewhat sternly, 'and if it had been, I shouldn't be talking about it. It 's just a person I 'd like to see.'

Chesman grinned. He understood.

'You 'll have to wrap it up well, then, think of something known to you both and to no one else, and ask her to write to a box number. They 'll give you one at the office.'

'Thanks, I will.' Frank fell into a brown study so unusual that Chesman, after toying a moment with his tankard, sighed, as one who hungered for news, drank, and moved on in search of it.

Frank borrowed paper and pen and set to work. What did he know about the girls? Nothing. Hyde Park, Royal Review, all too obvious. Then he did

recollect something. They were in service, he hadn't much doubt. He had mentioned Chantry Fields. So he wrote : ' Which night will you meet me where I said ? Write Box . . .' and left the number blank. He got to the littered untidy office of the paper just before it was closed for the night. The old cashier took his screed and surveyed it, made marks on it with his pencil, asking short and apparently foolish questions, and naming the cost. Frank paid. The cashier surveyed him through large spectacles.

' It 's usual to put an initial, to identify yourself.'

' I don't want to,' Frank said simply, and went as near blushing as was possible to him as he caught the old fellow's eye on him.

That was only the beginning of it. He had to go every day to see if there was any letter for his box number. There was none. His reputation stood it very badly. The other occupants of the room in which he worked, and whom he met most evenings in one of the bars he frequented, or at any cricket or drill that he attended, rallied him. There was bibulous Mason, and young Swan—Cygnet they called him—there was, worst of all, that chap Prosser whom he couldn't stand, a nasty prayer-meeting ' Pogramite ' who spent all his evenings, not merely in religious exercises, but in his own special brand of them, at a place of which he was top-dog, so rumour said. Well, he needn't think he

was top-dog of the sorting room at the Bank, nor top-dog of Frank Parsley. But that did not prevent Prosser from making himself awkward in all sorts of ways. He was definitely Frank's rival for the next promotion that might be going, though Frank, if ever the subject came up, affected good-humoured contempt of his rival's chances. He was a nasty suspicious fellow who always wanted to check all the figures you handed on to him—and as the work of all in the room was interdependent, and furnished the material from which the weekly balance was struck, he had plenty of opportunity of showing his suspiciousness. But most of all, where Mason and Swan were merely jocular, Prosser curled not only his lip, but his whole black beard, so it seemed, at Frank's putative exploits at the Review, more, at the whole of Frank's career, volunteering, cricket, conviviality, mashing, all of it, ostentatiously turned away his head from Frank's jokes, and took every opportunity of disagreeing with him, and an obvious satisfaction in correcting him whenever possible, in mere statements, or in the figures of the day's work.

And no reply came to the advertisement. No reply that Frank considered genuine. There was, indeed, an ill-written one offering to meet him at the Goat and Compasses, whenever he liked, signed 'Your old Sweetheart.' Sunday passed and he resolved not to renew

the advertisement. The next day there was a neat business-like looking envelope—suspiciously like a bank envelope. Inside was a clean folded piece of paper. No water-mark. Nothing on it but: '7.30. Tuesday.' With a judgment tinctured by scrutinising thousands of cheques, he decided that the writing was a feigned hand and that those girls didn't say 'seven-thirty.' On second thoughts this was natural enough. They had declined to give themselves away. They were still concealing their identity. He felt that the Tuesday rendezvous was genuine. He looked forward to it. A renewed confidence showed in his manner. His colleagues and friends rallied him about it the more. Prosser, of course, was correspondingly offensive. Frank caught those misanthropic brown eyes fixed on himself more than once. It made him unusually audacious and allusive in speech. On the Tuesday the growing feeling nearly flared up into a row. Frank, however little he would have liked to admit it, was excited. His reputation was by no means so solid as it appeared. Its basis was partly imaginary, a matter of keeping photos of titled ladies and stars of the stage pasted inside the lid of his desk, partly an infrequent sordid consorting under the impulse of drink with needy girls who had little to lose. He didn't know where this affair might lead him, but clothed it with his own somewhat facile optimism, and at seven-thirty on

the Tuesday evening slipped in among the crowd clustered against the palisade of the archery butt in Chantry Fields, with furtive roving eye and a heart that beat with bottled stout and anticipation.

The hour chimed, the quarter, the half. He could see no one. He surveyed the sparsely peopled walks under the elms that ran from the backs of the houses in Nether Bargate towards the green mounds of the city walls. There he did see some one, the last person he wanted to see. Prosser! What on earth did it mean? That chap ought to be praying somewhere, and in no case did he ever frequent Chantry Fields. It was not his line at all. Frank stared. He was fairly covered by the substantial hedge of people who were watching the archery. He could observe at his ease. That chap kept patrolling from one gate to the other, evidently watching both. The fool, any one could have dodged him in the crowd, or behind the trees and bushes. Or was it just some queer notion that had got into the chap's head. No, he was looking for some one. Frank did not want to be seen by that particular one of all the inhabitants of Easthampton. Even if the girl turned up—she was jolly late—he was ready enough to be seen with her. But not by Prosser. You never knew what use the chap would make of it.

But caution was not Frank's strong point. More-

over, another quarter chimed; that made an hour longer than ever he had waited for any woman before. It was already too long in his opinion. The archery was over, the onlookers dispersing. And then Prosser strode out of the gate on the Nether Bar side. Frank was in half a mind to follow him, but was in some haste to retrieve his wasted evening. He turned therefore towards the wall. He would be able to see the end of the bowls match at the Curfew Bell. To his astonishment, as he left the Fields, he ran right into Prosser, who must have gone round by Wall Lane, and walked at a good lick too. He looked Frank up and down with a sort of sneering vigilance. It was too much :

'What are you doing here?' he demanded.

Prosser thrust his bearded face with its hungry eyes even more forward than usual, and countered :

'What are you?'

'That 's my business!'

'Then it 's an unprofitable one—as usual!'

Frank had a difficulty in keeping his hands to his sides, but if there was one thing that didn't go with a situation in the Bank, it was getting mixed up with a row in the street. So he only said :

'I 'll thank you to keep a civil tongue in your head!'

'I 'll thank you to keep your lascivious one from tempting pure girls astray!'

'I won't be spoken to like that.'

'Then don't deserve it. Good night to you!'

The chap was right. Here was the keeper closing the gate. Frank turned away with a glance at Prosser's bent, energetically receding back.

[III]

William Wesley Prosser (the first name was given him after the Rev. Mr. Spurgeon), for all his decisive breaking-off with his adversary (he used the word almost in Bunyan's sense) and his success in having done what he set out to do that evening, strode back to his lodgings deeply disturbed. There seemed no end to it, and no way out of it. While scorning the man of the world's (Parsley's) glib assurance of 'knowing all about women,' he was deeply convinced that they fell into the three categories laid down by that infallible book, the Bible. There was the Virgin Mary sort, not to be worshipped of course, but which could be relied on to do their plain duty. There was the Mary Magdalene sort, who didn't do their duty but repented very creditably. And there was the Delilah sort that made other people do the repenting, whose punishment was all too retarded, he thought. But what upset him most was that, Bible or no, women as he found them would not go into those three schedules. He had not, in fact, had much chance of classifying, having always been very busy forcing his way up from his beginnings as a village shopkeeper's son and securing a situation in the Bank, and just recently he was

bound to admit 'women' had chiefly meant, for him, that Miss Leah Benskin, the elder one of the two who came from the Bank House, and sat in the New Providence Chapel, and listened to him with such glowing eyes and open mouth, who sang those glorious rousing hymns with upturned eyes and mouth ever wider open. Did he think her beautiful? Beauty was chiefly a delusion and a snare unless it was spiritual, then you couldn't see it. Did he worship her with his body, and desire to cleave to her? Yes, he did, almost fiercely. There was no snare and delusion about that, it was in the Bible. But it took so long to arrive at that point that he was kept in a state of becoming humility by the doubt as to whether he would be able to contain himself for such an extended period. For he had put aside all temptation. Hadn't he gone without beer, of which he liked the taste, and the dalliance proper to any village boy? Hadn't he gone without Leah—whom he felt to be already his—and didn't there yawn in front of him the gap of years that must elapse before he could assume that he was in a position to support her in the way he meant her to be supported? for he had no intention of stopping short at anything less than the managership of the Bank. He was shrewd enough to see that the already ageing Mr. Dormer could not last for ever, and that the partners, waxed fat with prosperity and already members of the county set, took less and less

interest in the business. Well had the Chapel at which his great namesake had preached, situate in the pleasant easy-going old street, left derelict by the transfer of business from the water-side to power looms further afield, been named the New Providence. For it was such to him, the Providence of the rising, the energetic, the righteous, and the saved. And since Old Providence, by which he understood all previous symbols of the Power watching over the earth, was so dilatory that the froward and the lukewarm still sat in all the high places, the New Providence gave him leave, as it seemed to him, to grease the wheels of destiny, even to put a spoke in them and make them get on. Such had been his frame of mind, an intermittent but chronic Bible fever racked with doubt as to whether Delilah rather than Mary didn't inhabit Leah's person, when only the previous Saturday Providence had begun to move almost too fast.

The thing fell with all the fatefulness that he expected of Providence, and did not always achieve by his best management of that incalculable power. Saturday evening was the time of the week. On that evening the hard struggle to make some progress in that all too static institution, Doughty's Bank, where aged incompetence was sheltered so that it survived to unlikely and unmerited old age, and young energy and application could not get itself noticed, was stilled for

the nonce. The almost equally exhausting struggle to make certain of being noticed, of getting on in Heaven, which filled Sunday, was ahead. Having taken a brisk walk over the Moor, a practice which helped him to marshal his thoughts, he was sitting in the bay window of the big room he rented, on the first floor of a converted merchant's house in quiet old Hanover Street, where all merchants had long since ceased to reside. Over his head the workshop of a small tradesman who hired what had been a weaving garret was still. Below him the offices that occupied the ground floor were deserted. At his feet the abandoned garden, leased to a job-master, was fresh and green, if untended. His great Bible was open, and he was composing his address for the morrow upon fair white foolscap paper in his rather too sloping hand, that had been unfavourably compared with that of the heathen Parsley. The glorious verbiage of Holy Writ ran easily in his mind in this hour of relaxation and preparation. 'I am come to my garden,' the Good Book said. How true (when properly understood by a believer). Perhaps he would take a text from the Song of Songs and explain the spiritual significance of it, the difference between earthly and heavenly love. Perhaps that would make clear to Leah Benskin, to the whole world (the world of the faithful at the meeting-house, and the unfaithful at the Bank and elsewhere), even perhaps to himself,

what he felt about Leah. There came a ring at the bell. His landlady, who was clearing away his tea in his sitting-room next door, went down and answered it. She returned, not alone, tapped on his bedroom door, and putting in her head announced :

'A young person of the name of Benskin to see you ! '

His heart beat so violently that he had to stand still a moment. Incidentally the good woman departed with her tray. He wrenched open the door and went in.

It was Rachel, not Leah. He stared. Her own feelings seemed to cause her almost as much difficulty as his did to him. Her eyes were fixed upon the floor, her hands tightly clasped before her.

'Sit down,' he managed to get out. 'What is it ? '

She sank upon a chair and suddenly her voice came, with an effort that was moving in its sincere desperation :

'It 's Leah ! Save her ! '

For one sickening instant his heart stopped ; then the pulse hammered in his temple. His voice was harsh and hoarse, its tone that of righteous wrath and command.

'What do you mean ? '

For answer, Rachel began to cry and pushed across the table a scrap torn, he could see, from the Personal Column of the *Courier*. He could make nothing of it,

and between his perturbation, mystification, and annoyance, said testily :

'What is this ? '

Rachel reached across and put her finger on a line which said something about meeting some one at an appointed place. He glared at her, and his eyes, his attitude, his speechless pent-up energy, squeezed the words from her :

'It 's for her to meet him ! '

'Who ? '

'Him what we met at the Review.'

'Talk sense, can't you ! '

He sounded so terrifying that Rachel broke down. He had to lay his hand on hers, tell her to calm herself, and remind her of her Christian duty. Little by little he got a more or less coherent story out of her. The two girls had had the day off to visit their aunt in London and to go to the Royal Review in Hyde Park. There a soldier had accosted them and promised to make an assignation with Leah. This was the assignation. Incredible.

'You don't mean to say your sister dallies with unknown men . . . ? '

'Oh, no ! ' Rachel was slightly shocked. 'She knew 'im ! '

William Wesley Prosser brought his fist down on the table so that it jumped :

'What 's his name ? '

Rachel began to whimper :

'Oo ! I doan' think I ought to tell you that.'

'Tell me this instant ! '

'Let go my arm ! '

'If you don't tell me . . .' his voice, terribly distinct in its iron restraint, rang in the quiet room, 'your sin will be seven times blacker than your sister's. Who shall wash you white again, do you think, if you deliberately . . .'

Rachel shivered.

''Is name 's Parsley, he work at the Bank ! '

There was dead stillness save for Rachel rubbing her released arm. Then he said in a voice that Rachel evidently felt to be an anti-climax :

'Your sister has answered this, has she ? '

'No, she doan' know nuthin' about it. I see her looking in the master's mornin' paper the day after we come back from London, so nex' mornin' I got it first out of his study. This mornin' I see that bit there. I knew it was him because he said it was to be Chantry Fields.'

'You 've done very well, Rachel.'

She perked up visibly at this and moved a little nearer. He hardly noticed, he was thinking hard.

'This—er—man doesn't know that you and your sister are in service at the Bank ? '

'No. He doesn't know, no more than the dead!' Rachel was losing interest and seemed two-minded, almost compunctious.

'Of course not, he wouldn't, that Parsley!' William Wesley Prosser restrained himself. Providence was all that he ever said it was. He would, under it, save the innocent, punish the evil-doer, justify his Faith.

'Very good. Leave it to me. You have enabled me to snatch a brand from the burning! You 'll both be at meeting to-morrow night.'

Rachel seemed reluctant to go, and he patted her shoulder in a fatherly way as he showed her out. Then he went back to the writing of his address. The Song of Songs had disappeared. The prophets, the fighting, denouncing prophets arose from the printed pages of the Old Testament, and drove his pen along the paper so that he had to take care of the legibility of the writing. He slept but ill, although it was late when he had finished. His strong primitive feelings began to undergo a change. He tried to fix his mind on Righteousness, but somehow the glorious imagery of Scripture mingled with and overlaid its stark fierceness. He tried to keep glowing his just hatred of the bibber and the fornicator that Parsley was. But the thought of Leah kept stealing in and softening and diverting his mood. Waking late, he was in no better case. He awaited the evening meeting—the girls could not get

out in the morning to attend Sabbath School—with such feverishness that his hearty appetite suffered, he had to concentrate to gulp down his food. He washed his strong hairy body and dressed it in clean linen and black cloth with more than usual, almost sacerdotal, care.

At length the golden evening came, purified of the clamour and bustle of week-day, alive only in the chorus of church bells and the hastening footsteps of the devout. He went along and up the yard to the little meeting-house, and from the cupboard-like vestry watched the little band of the faithful gather. When the two girls appeared he had eyes only for Leah, and the constriction in his chest seriously discommoded him. It left him the moment he went on to the tiny platform beside the bare, savagely scrubbed table and gave out the hymn. Then something lifted him as if he were about to fly. What other members of the flock were present, what they noticed or thought, he had no idea. The one or two old or middle-aged couples, the queer single members, the uncertain, probably doubting, younger ones might be there or not. He saw only Leah. His eyes burned into hers, lifted towards him. 'Jesu, lover of my soul,' she was lilting in her fresh, sweet, rather breathless voice. She meant him, William Wesley Prosser. He was that. And she was it too. Exaltation so possessed him that not only

did he pray fervently, as he had trained himself to do, with closed eyes, the words welling up from his heart as never before, but when it came to his carefully prepared address he twisted the manuscript in his hands as if it were at once a staff to support him and a weapon to smite Evil. Never had he so signally trounced the Evil-doer, never painted in such colours the joys of Heaven. He was hardly conscious of the increasingly frequent interjections, the most coveted praise that any lay preacher could receive. 'Amen,' 'Glory be,' came wafted to him on the warm air from one after another of the packed benches of the tiny place. And guided by no volition of his own, he broke into the Lord's Prayer just at the right moment. They all stood and joined in. That fittingly closed the address which might otherwise have been prolonged into the dusk. He hardly knew what hymn he gave out, or watched the plate passing from hand to hand. He stepped down among the elect, with a brief word or hand-shake, took the keys from the old woman who was caretaker and dismissed her, and coming abreast of the two girls, murmured to Leah :

'I want to speak to you for a moment.'

He had no ears for the warm commendation thrust upon him from all sides, no eyes for Rachel's disconcerted lingering, or the plateful of coppers and small silver. He drew Leah into the dim little vestry,

lighted no lamp, tried for one paltry moment to recall what he had to warn her against, and how he ought to fortify her against temptation. The fountain of his words had suddenly dried up. Leah stood before him flushed, with shining eyes, naked to the soul in spite of the furbelows proper to a modest maiden, infected with the same excitement, but, instead of being daunted and abashed by it, triumphant, august, almost terrible. He stretched out his hands in supplication that was nearly protest. She raised her arms and flung them round his neck, murmuring some simple, soothing endearment. He could not reply. His lips were imprisoned.

When, at the chiming of a clock somewhere, Leah freed herself, his knees were weak, and his hand trembled as he wiped the perspiration from his forehead. He tottered beside her, as, self-possessed and serene, she made her way down the yard, having recovered her umbrella and gloves, put her hat straight and generally re-invested herself with the most perfect respectability of any girl who ever wore black on Sundays. He had to stare after her to assure himself that it was indeed she who had promised to marry him, and had just left him with such words as ' My lamb, my sweetheart.' Left him ! She would never leave him again. The irrevocable nature of what they had done was apparent to his clearing brain, used to hard

fact. The awfulness of having secret great possessions was borne in on him. For just as she could never be taken from him, so he felt every one must try to do so. His intention in answering Frank Parsley's advertisement was to warn off that pretender in unqualified terms. Yet, when it came to the point on the Tuesday night, he couldn't do it. Marriage was a serious matter. The fact that he had just got wind of imminent promotion in the Bank rendered it all the more serious. He had to hold himself in for all he was worth. So he merely admonished Frank, but saying nothing of his own proprietary rights over Leah's affections.

[IV]

In Leah's bosom that Sunday night an afterglow of primitive emotion lengthened out until she reached the Bank House. Had any one asked her if she were a deeply religious girl, she would have said, no, she knew her place better than that. Had any one asked her if she were a good girl, she would have said, yes, she hoped so, for she had no illusions as to the evident fate of bad ones, and did not desire to share it. The only time when she felt she really 'had' religion was when she was singing. Goodness, on the other hand, which she knew she possessed, was hers only at the price of continual struggle. When men looked at her, as they nearly all did, she found it difficult not to let them have what she knew they wanted. She didn't visualise it very clearly, but it seemed to her a small, easy matter. Yet she knew she mustn't, so she didn't. And now religion had come near, and goodness had become easy, in the arms of that young Mr. Prosser who spoke so beautiful, and was henceforward her lamb, her own. For he was to her at once a master to whose level she would not dare to aspire, and a child, absurdly perturbed and needing to be comforted.

She rang the kitchen door bell, and Rachel opened it.

'Wherever have you bin?' was her cross greeting.

'Oh, Rachel darling, do you know what?'

'No!' Leah's embrace was shaken off.

'He asked me, an' I said I would!'

'You never?'

'That I did. Well, wouldn't you . . .?' There in the back entry Leah detained her sister. 'He say he *love* me!' Deep and rich was the tone of Leah's voice.

'If you ask me,' Rachel retorted, 'you 're looking above you!'

Leah shook her head with deliberate conviction:

'No. I love 'im. Like what it say in the Bible!'

Mrs. Wellowes' voice broke in on them:

'Now then, together. Master's supper. Look sharp!'

When they went to bed, Leah was too bemused to mollify her sister, who undressed with silent emphasis and took her usual wall-side of the bed and turned her back. Leah sat musing in the candle-light, undressing slower than girl ever undressed before. Dreamily she said, 'Rachel!' but getting no reply, blew out the candle, embraced the obdurate back and slept.

On the morrow, however, it became impossible to ignore the open breach that yawned between the sisters. Leah was not going to tell Mrs. Wellowes and cook of her good fortune until she had a ring to

show for it. She expected to receive this token on the Wednesday when she was next to meet William, that being her night out. Then she could be officially courted. In the meanwhile she was extra nice to the milkman, butcher, and all the other men who, in the course of the day's work, each had a word with her, as a matter of course, for they all liked her. Slightly above herself with the new knowledge that they, poor fellows, had lost their chance though blissfully unaware of the fact, she allowed them small liberties that rendered it necessary to admonish them with :

'Now, then, that 's enough, go you along. Come, now ! '

She even tried to break through Rachel's black-browed silence with the only reassurance she could imagine necessary :

'Lor', don't put on parts, Rachel ; you 'll get a chap one of these days ! ' Rachel only scowled. 'I shan't be no different to you, Rachel darling ! ' Leah pleaded. Rachel turned and left her. It was almost as if Rachel had something to hide. Leah's face soon softened again, with the lovely feeling inside her which she expressed by singing :

'Just as I am, alone, to thee ! '

at the top of her voice, as she washed up.

Wednesday came up to her expectations except that William was less of the master, the preacher, the Sun of my Soul, and more of the child than she could have thought it possible, gave her the ring, told her not to wear it for a day or two, had two or three preoccupied fits when he could say nothing, and was evidently thinking of something else. Leah didn't mind. She did not value words highly as a means of expression. If she had had her way, kisses should never come to an end and hugs be a permanent posture. But it couldn't be. The pauses in his protestations, the lack of reason for keeping their engagement quiet and the ring hidden, didn't worry her. He had obviously something on his mind. She was happy enough; so happy that on Thursday she was willingly doing something for Mrs. Wellowes which necessitated her going upstairs about the time when the clerks left by the house door. She was just coming down again and crossing the hall to the kitchen when the door that led to the office opened and out came that Mr. Parsley.

'Hullo!' he cried, standing stock-still.

Leah was not the sort to have reflected that some such accident was inevitable sooner or later, nor did she make anything of it now. She merely gave him her warm smile that she could never have denied any man, and disappeared through the green baize-covered door, just as he said:

'Here, I say!'

Leah had no time to glance through the peep-hole to see what he would do next, for in a flash he had swung the door open and followed her. She skipped into her pantry, intrigued, amused, hardly even scandalised. She tried to shut her pantry door but his foot was in it. And the next thing she knew was that her back was pressed so hard against the sink that it hurt her, because she didn't wear a bustle in her print frock, and she had caught the two hands he had flung towards her waist by the wrists, and was holding tight.

'Whatever do you mean?' she remembered to protest, though her eyes and lips expressed no indignation.

'Why didn't you come to Chantry Fields on Tuesday night?'

''Cos it 's not my night out—and I wasn't asked!' she replied with perfect truth and some surprise.

'Why, I put a line in the paper, as I said. . . .'

'You didn't dare?' But really she didn't believe him.

'Yes, and that chap Prosser came!'

'He never!'

Frank sounded annoyed and freed himself from her with a rough gesture, but she defended herself and he grumbled, exasperated:

'It 's a nice trick to play on a chap.'

'Who 's playing tricks? If you want to know, him and me 's engaged. . . .'

She would never have said it if it hadn't been for the curiously similar feeling the touch of both men gave her, and a hasty difficult recollection that she must now discriminate between one and the other. How she might have fared she never knew, for at that moment, there, behind him in the open doorway, appeared Rachel, and even the incurious Leah, with her mind always in the present and informed by the most immediate physical contact, could not forbear to smile. They did look so comic, them two! The sourness on Rachel's face melted into amazement, the amazement into a sort of unholy curiosity to see how far a man and woman confronted in the narrow span of the pantry would go, so that she took an involuntary half-step forward. He, on the other hand, displayed an instant incredulity stronger than Rachel's; then his face was invaded by a sudden dark flush of which Leah divined well enough the deep-seated cause, and took it as a compliment; this was displaced by alarm at seeing her look beyond him, and hearing Rachel's light step; and this by utter confusion at being caught. Quite unnecessary, Leah thought, as if any one would grudge him his evident and quite comprehensible feelings. Finally there came another look she didn't in the least understand, and he turned and went away.

At the boom of the green baize door closing behind him, Leah sat back on the edge of the sink and shook with laughter.

'Whatever are you laughing at?' Rachel demanded.

'Your faces! Don't stand there, gal, remindin' me. I shall die of it, I know I shall!'

'Serve you right—carrying on with another man when you 're engaged.'

'Rachel! The idea! I never let him touch me—although I dare say he 'd a-liked to,' admitted the candid Leah.

'Well, it was a pretty near thing, if you arst me. I 'd like to know what 'd a-happened if I hadn't come in!'

'I sh'd ha' boxed his ears if he 'd got too forward!'

'There 's a way to behave!'

'Why, Rachel,' Leah had the air of making a discovery, 'I believe you wish he was after you!'

'That 's a lie!' returned Rachel decisively. But the incident did nothing to improve their relations.

On Sunday, William was in a state. Leah could make nothing of it. He had something extraordinary on his mind, she was sure now, from the way he looked and sang and preached. Yet when they were alone together he couldn't get it out, though she tried to coax him. But he now insisted that they should get married at once. The joy of it soon overcame all Leah's hesitations or wonderment, and her perfunctory

attempts, for the sake of what she considered good manners, to delay it.

Accordingly, on the Monday morning, she boldly put on her ring and asked Mrs. Wellowes if she might see the mistress. Ushered into the presence, she told her simple tale, her hands folded before her, eyes downcast, because it was proper behaviour, the reason for which she felt clearly enough. Her emotions were too strong to be exhibited to her mistress.

Mrs. Dormer was kind and reasonable, and conceded the month's notice that William had insisted on.

'I 'm sure I hope you 'll be very happy, Leah. I shall be sorry to lose you, and I hope that you 'll be sorry to go in that sense. You 've always been comfortable here ? '

'Oh, yes, M'm.'

'That 's right. Has your intended husband a good situation ? What did you say the name was ? '

'It 's Mr. Prosser, M'm. He work in the Bank ! And on Sunday he preach at the New Providence Chapel, where Rachel and me go ! '

'Oh ! Yes, I see.' Mrs. Dormer pondered a moment, and resumed : 'In that case, perhaps you 'd like to go home for a week or two, to make yourself some things. You could go almost at once ; I 'll talk to Mrs. Wellowes and she 'll tell you ! '

'I don't want to put you out, M'm ! '

'We shall manage, I dare say. I think it would be best. You see, we 've never allowed any one into the kitchen under such circumstances, and Mr. Prosser might feel a little awkward. It 's a shame to spoil your courting. Yes. You will be able to go home and see your father and mother and get ready. That will be best!'

'Yes, M'm, thank you, M'm!'

Just as Leah bobbed herself out, Mrs. Dormer looked closely at her and said:

'You will have time, won't you, Leah? There 's nothing hurrying you, is there? Tell me anything you wish to tell me.'

'Oh no, M'm, except in a manner of speaking, my young m—— Mr. —— he 's set on it, M'm, that's all!'

'That 's very nice. When Mrs. Wellowes tells you that you can go, see me again. Mr. Dormer and I would like to give you something—er—substantial—for your home!'

'Oh, thank you, M'm!'

So the news was out after that and the ring was on, and amid the buzz of wonder, envy, congratulation, exclamation, Mrs. Wellowes made arrangements, and Leah was free within the week.

On their last night together in their garret, as Leah sat panting after cording her box, she was at a loss to find words to express her feelings to Rachel. She had

never grumbled at her work, had sung at it rather, and now that she was going to an even more blessed state she wanted to tell every one how much she liked them. Rachel's obduracy was no barrier. Leah was not in need of answers to her remarks. At length, unbuttoning her bodice with effort, as if her heart was too full for the tightly stretched material, she wound up her panegyric of William, master, mistress, and all the others with the slight detachment of one destined for better things :

'An' that ole Mrs. Wellowes, I mus' say she 's bin a jewel, lettin' me go like this ! '

Rachel turned over with the suddenness of one who simply can't get to sleep for the chatter :

'If you want t'know, she arst me if it was All Right ! '

Leah, methodically withdrawing a last hairpin, dropped her hands, and sent her dark brown hair cascading over her smooth full shoulders.

For a moment Rachel had to stare to make out what emotions were exhibited upon her sister's submerged features. Then she turned away. Laughter and anticipation were there.

'Did she, now ? ' came Leah's voice, as she swept her hair back. 'Well, I don't think none the less of her. I wouldn't let him, of course, but I wouldn't like to keep him waiting long, neither ! Well, he won't have to,

will he ?' And hugging herself in her long powerful arms, Leah swayed from side to side as if rocking an imaginary infant, crooning to herself the song their mother had sung over their cradles :

'White wings, they never grow weary . . .'

breaking off with : 'Well, I 'm weary enough !' and in two minutes was snoring.

[V]

That morning young Mr. Bird, the junior partner, and Mr. Doughty Dormer, whom it was now the fashion to call 'Manager' rather than by the exact and historic term 'Chief Clerk,' sat in the Bank parlour. Of late the business had been so safe and successful that it was more and more left to these two, and their responsibilities invested them with a certain cheerful gravity that became men recently, informally, almost accidentally saddled with the particular sort of privilege that was theirs. About them, the furniture and decoration of the room, its few books of record, its print or two, map and clock, all dating back nearly a hundred years, echoed the quiet sufficiency of young Mr. Bird, the assured authority of Mr. Doughty Dormer. The Bank stood for solidity, not mutability. Yet that very state of things, one of the most comfortable ever known in the whole world, brought its own trouble. Prosperity meant change, and almost resentfully the manager said :

'I really think we must have an additional cashier, sir! We don't get finished until eight on Market Day.'

'Who is there?'

'It lies between Parsley and Prosser. Parsley has the better appearance and manner. But Prosser has a certain weight with the Methody people in the villages. He preaches at the New Providence Chapel in Hanover Street. New Providence is a good name. They all get on, that lot!'

'I know the fella,' drawled Mr. Bird; 'don't like him.'

Mr. Bird had a faint uneasiness natural to one who was continually reminded that his own grandfather had been a Quaker in a low-crowned hat, who preached and called people 'Thee' and 'Thou.' Having 'got on' in the person of that ancestor, he naturally deprecated imitation.

'Parsley 's the good-lookin' chap in the volunteers, isn't he?'

'Yes. A little inclined to be careless. A lee-tle dressy too, flower in button-hole, all that. It 'll pass, of course. Inclined to back horses sometimes.'

Mr. Bird shifted in his chair. 'Don't mind so long as he backs the quick ones.'

'Quite so, sir!'

'H'm. Which do you think?'

'Very near thing, sir. I think you had better see them both!'

'Very well.'

Mr. Dormer touched the swan-neck bell handle beside the fireplace. A junior clerk appeared.

'Send Mr. Parsley.'

Frank Parsley stepped smartly into the room, having stood an instant outside to give his moustache a twirl. He knew why he was sent for, felt confident. The basis of his confidence was that, living cheaply enough in lodgings, he found his amusements expensive. The extra 'rise' that would come with promotion would be welcome, if not necessary. And there was his reputation to keep up. No use being called 'Dare-Devil Frank' if you couldn't. He faced Mr. Bird, but listened to Mr. Dormer.

'The partners are thinking of appointing an additional cashier. I have mentioned your name among others. Do you think you could do it?'

'Yes, sir!' Frank came no nearer, conscious that a slight odour of beer and tobacco clung to his clothes.

'You 'll have to be careful, you understand?'

'Yes, sir!'

'And you 'll have to take out a guarantee!'

'I 'm prepared to do that, sir!'

'Are you? Your account isn't.'

'Sorry, sir!' The stroke was so shrewd Frank turned from the partner to the manager. 'Few extra expenses. Begin to pay the premium next quarter.'

'Any debts?'

'No, sir!'

'Do you wish to ask him anything, Mr. Bird?'

'No.'

'You can go, Parsley. We will let you know what decision the partners come to. Tell the junior to send Mr. Prosser.'

The door closed. The manager's eye caught the partner's:

'That was a lie. He owes Burgeon for that tie-pin!'

'Oh, well . . .' Mr. Bird mused.

'Quite so, sir! Small matter. Here 's Prosser. Come in!'

William Wesley Prosser stood awkwardly, fidgeting slightly, his eyes in his forward-thrusting head roving from one to the other, his beard rubbing on his black tie and dicky. He was, in fact, in a feverish state. Rachel Benskin had been to see him with a tale about Leah still seeing that fellow Parsley. He had then been forced by the dreadful fear of losing her, that had overcome his other dreadful fear of the Delilah in all women, and he had bidden her make their engagement public and hasten the preparations for marriage. In spite of all he found something had 'got about' in the office, and even conscious rectitude was not proof against the awful doubt as to how the news might affect the imminent question of promotion that he would

have liked to have been assured of before making his plans public. Mr. Dormer was speaking:

'The partners are thinking of appointing an additional cashier. I have mentioned your name among others. Do you think you could do it?'

'Oh yes, sir. I feel sure I could satisfy you! I . . .'

'Yes. Your work is satisfactory. You 'd have to keep your opinions in the background, and treat every one alike. You understand that?'

'Yes, sir, I would be careful to do so!'

'What 's the rumour I hear this morning, that you 're going to be married?'

'That is correct, sir.'

'Do we know the lady?'

'Miss Leah Benskin!' An instant's silence yawned.

'My housemaid?'

'Yes, sir. I trust there is no objection, sir. She and I have been fellow-worshippers . . .'

'You might have enlightened us sooner!'

'It came upon me very suddenly, sir. A visitation of the spirit, sir. . . . I believe she is informing Mrs. Dormer at this minute.'

'Very well.' Mr. Dormer's voice had the quality of silencing other voices, even inspired ones. 'We shall acquaint you with the partners' decision.'

The door closed with a sound of agitated uncertainty. The partner's eye sought those of the manager :

' 'Pon my soul, I don't know, sir ! '

' Don't like the way he talks, Dormer. I suppose he hasn't been . . . er . . .'

' Don't think so, sir. Very respectable girl. But I shall make certain of that, through my wife. However, I feel sure, Not ! After all, no business of ours, so long as it 's All right ! '

' No. Don't care what he does. It 's the way he has ! '

' Couldn't countenance a scandal, sir. No. The serious thing is, he 's too young to marry. Go and have a large family. Get into debt ! And it 's a bad example. Can't have the clerks courting in my kitchen. . . .'

' What do you think we should do ? '

' I suggest we give Parsley twelve months' trial.'

' Very well.'

[VI]

Authoritative as Mr. Dormer's voice was, unquestioning as might be the assent of young Mr. Bird, powers greater than they ruled the universe and disposed of their proposals. They might say: 'Give Parsley twelve months' trial,' the person who was, perhaps, most severely tried was William Wesley Prosser. Marriage, accepted by him with a becoming seriousness, threw no light upon his previous confusion as to the true nature of woman. The first feeling of an immense, almost physical relief of the early weeks was soon dissipated. When it became soon obvious that Leah was going to have a baby, it seemed to him that she almost took advantage of his baffled intelligence. In no way had he erred or strayed from the path of perfect rectitude. Yet he had been totally unable to disentangle the essential Delilah in his wife, and cast it out, from the essential Mary (of both sorts) in her. For she had been a model of rectitude too, and was continuously so. No Mary and Martha combined could better adorn the lodgings in Hanover Street (or any other imaginable home) than she. Always pleasant to look at and cheerful to be with, after a few clouded days of bodily readjustment she became

magnificent in a new dignity, serene with a deep contentment. She kept the place scrupulously clean, cooked well, and listened to his every word. But that only made it the more obvious that she, and in particular her present state, had taken charge of him, his daily life, his career at the Bank, his thoughts even. What was the good of his saying : ' We will do thus ' or ' thus,' and of her acquiescing, when shortly, often without her going to the pains of pointing it out, he found himself obliged to do otherwise, because he was married, because he loved her, because they were going to have a family, all in due order, and as it should be. At moments he had a fleeting notion that the ways of evil-doing could not be more fatally predestined than his deliberate treading of the paths of rectitude. There was no fault to be found in her, and if there had been she certainly expiated it with bodily suffering that was ordained for her. Yet every day he found himself being driven to all sorts of uncontemplated expedients, incurring expenses unforeseen, adopting habits that were not his. One sanctuary alone remained. He could retreat with his religious life to the bedroom, with its table in the window. And even that would be impossible to him before long, so far as he could see. He felt sure, moreover, that his marriage had fatally handicapped him in the race for promotion, because there had been issued from the Bank parlour,

properly written out in Mr. Dormer's handwriting and signed by Mr. Bird, and solemnly pasted into the morocco-bound 'standing orders' book that all clerks were required to read and initial, a new rule, that the partners were to be informed of any contemplated marriages among the staff. So having, he felt, a grievance, and being totally unable to allot the blame to himself or Leah, as the months went by he found only one outlet to his harassed feelings. It was a congenial one. He applied himself with more zeal than ever to the day's work. He would deserve much. Then perhaps he would acquire, not so exactly riches, which were ill-spoken of in Holy Writ, as the earthly equivalent of treasure laid up in Heaven—that quiet competence of a good balance in the firm's books that was the reality behind Mr. Bird's position as a partner, Mr. Dormer's as manager, and so on. Never wer the bank's books more scrupulously kept than those attended to by William Wesley Prosser.

And then, as the distractions of Leah's confinement and maternity added weight to the long toil of impressing those above him, and of accumulating savings out of his modest salary, Providence did give him a sort of oblique sidelong smile. Always vigilant, he began to notice small infringements of the rules, minor delinquencies on the part of the newly appointed (and still only probationer) cashier, Frank Parsley, who had got

ahead of him precisely for being all he was not. The fellow carried off the matter with a high hand, held no communication with his erstwhile colleague of the sorting room save such brief sentences as were necessary to the conduct of the business. But William Wesley's stubborn pugnacity was aroused. With perfect if distant politeness, he began to watch his successful rival, day by day, entry by entry. The time was long, the vigil unfruitful, but he was unremitting.

Less than twelve months later, Rachel was helping Leah with Baby, spending her evening out at Hanover Street, from which William and Leah had not as yet been able to afford to move. The big noisy infant had effected an almost entire reconciliation between the sisters, who were engaged, Leah in bathing him, and Rachel in washing up the tea-service Mr. and Mrs. Dormer had given the Prossers, in the great old-fashioned stone-flagged kitchen, behind the offices, now closed for the day. Between the noise and the preoccupation, it took two jangles on the rusty old door-bell to recall Leah to the fact that the landlady was out for the evening.

'Go and see who it is, Rachel, there 's a love; I can't, can I, and William don't like being upset!' She looked down at the round little face absorbed in imbibing the nutriment she was so plentifully supplied with, as if no further argument was necessary.

Rachel went, summarily drying her hands on her cloth. There, on the threshold, stood Frank Parsley.

'Good evening. Can I see Mr. Prosser?'

Rachel viewed him, as she could only view him, one who had disappointed her hopes, and said coldly:

'I 'll see. He 's writing his address, upstairs!'

For all that, some spark of interest in the somewhat battered good looks of the man from whom she had saved her sister and who had never been properly grateful to her, not in any way you could mention, must have glowed in Rachel. For she said to Leah only that it was 'a man come to see William,' but carried up the tray of washed and wiped crockery to put it away in the sitting-room cupboard. If you did this quietly enough you heard what was going on in the bedroom, where William read and wrote by the big window. And what she heard, a mysterious matter about what was in a till and what ought to have been, what Frank was going to put there to-morrow and what William said ought to have been there when he locked up at night, would soon have slaked her interest had it not been for the extraordinary tones the men used. Frank's was broken and beseeching, William's firm, implacable, and full of conscious rectitude. Any lingering tenderness Rachel may have felt for the former was overlaid by a satisfaction in feeling that he was being served right. For, after all, William had done the right thing by Leah,

and Frank hadn't by nobody that she knew of, and she agreed with William that the righteous shall flourish, though she herself hadn't yet flourished as she felt she ought. So she put the things away softly, smiling a little smile, and slipping quietly away as sounds of some bargain concluded and steps approaching the door warned her not to be caught.

Leah was just hushing baby off when William came into the kitchen, and at the way he spoke and the look on his face both girls stared at and listened to him.

'Leah! The Lord has delivered him into my hands!'

'Who ever do you mean, William?'

'That fellow Parsley, who got made cashier over my head—but only on twelve months' trial.'

'Hush. William, don't talk so loud. You 'll wake him up again!' There was no gleam of interest in anything else than that which she carried in her arms.

'But, Leah! Don't you see, I 'll get my chance now; they must give it me. I found him out, putting his own cheque in as cash, and he 's been to beg me to overlook it—but you wouldn't understand all that. It means promotion, Leah, and we 'll be able to move, and have more money. . . .'

'That 'll be a good thing.' Leah nodded sagely.

Rachel was more interested.

'You mean they 'll put him down to put you up?'

'I feel sure they will.' William turned to Rachel in his anxiety to share his triumph with some one and despair at awakening Leah's interest. 'He 'd have let the firm down, it 's all his extravagance and goings on. And I 've been the one to catch him. I 've made him promise to see Mr. Doughty and make a clean breast of it in the morning. Then we shall see! It 's Providence, sheer Providence, that 's what it is!'

'Lor',' said Rachel thoughtfully. But how much of her feeling was reverence for the divine direction of events, how much a feeling of being even with Frank, how much admiration for William and envy of Leah, neither she nor any one else could have said.

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